

Updating Newtown's Plan of Conservation and Development

PUBLIC PLANNING WORKSHOP

March 8, 2003

WORKSHOP TOPIC #5

Economic Development: How To Grow Newtown's Commercial Property Tax Base At A Rate Similar To The Town's Growth In Population?

Introduction

Newtown's economy contains approximately 800 businesses employing 7,400 people who provide a wide variety of goods and services and contribute substantially to Newtown's tax base. While Newtown's workforce increased between 1990 and 2001 from 11,579 to 12,305 persons, employment within Newtown declined from 7,900 to 7,420 jobs. This translates into more commuter traffic to out of town job sites. The Economic Development Commission has identified a lack of suitable economic development sites needed to support the future expansion of Newtown's economy.

The following summarizes the Issues, Goals and Strategies that have been discussed for this topic:

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

ISSUE #1: Shortage of Viable Economic Development Sites

1. The Newtown Economic Development Commission identifies a lack of land suitable to support new economic development activity. While there is a sizeable inventory of vacant land zoned for commercial and industrial uses, significant areas of this inventory are incapable of supporting meaningful economic development due to a lack of infrastructure, poor accessibility to major arterials and the presence of sensitive environmental resources, including wetlands and aquifers.

Goal: Increase the Inventory of Viable Economic Development Sites

Strategies:

1. Develop and economic development strategy that prioritizes economic development opportunities including commercial center redevelopment, brownfield redevelopment and Fairfield Hills redevelopment. "Greenfield" development would be a last priority.
2. Expand the Sandy Hook Design District so that it extends up Church Hill Road toward Exit 10 and southward along Washington Avenue toward I-84. Permit a higher residential density within this area when it is part of a mixed-use development that includes both commercial and residential uses;

3. Enable Dodgingtown to become a small mixed-use hamlet at a scale to serve nearby neighborhoods, with convenience retail and housing uses permitted to be developed when combined into a single development;
4. Enable Botsford to become a small mixed-use hamlet at a scale to serve nearby neighborhoods, with convenience retail and housing uses permitted to be developed when combined into a single development;
5. Consider rezoning the R-1 areas on the west side of Route 25 south of the Borough to a mixed use zone that enables the development of projects that include both commercial and residential uses on the same parcel.
6. The 1993 POD recommended the development of residential uses within the Route 25 corridor south of the Borough. Expand upon this recommendation to encourage the development of mixed-use projects that include both commercial and residential uses on the same parcel.
7. Consider rezoning the south side of Route 6 west side of Pocono Road to enable the development of mixed-use projects that include both commercial and residential uses on the same parcel.
8. Support the economic development of the 37.5 acre parcel accessed from Commerce Road that the Town will be receiving from the State of Connecticut.
9. Support the economic development elements of the recommended re-use plan for Fairfield Hills Hospital Campus;
10. Permit the development of bed and breakfast establishments within the Borough, Sandy Hook, commercial areas and as part of mixed-use projects;
11. Once the Town's geographic information system (GIS) becomes fully operational, examine the current inventory of existing parcels zoned for economic development uses relative to development constraints, such as the presence of wetlands and steep slopes, poor access, etc. Consider rezoning those properties that are deemed not suitable to support economic development activities.

ISSUE #2: Transportation in Newtown's Commercial Corridors

1. Newtown's major commercial corridors are the most heavily traveled arterials in Town. Areas of traffic congestion and safety issues within these corridors have been described in Plan Memorandum #7, Transportation and Circulation;
2. As Newtown and the surrounding areas continue to grow, Newtown's network of State and local roads will experience increases in traffic volumes that are likely to create new points of congestion and additional safety issues.

Goal: *Preserve Development Capacity: Address traffic congestion problems and safety issues.*

Strategies:

1. Implement a coordinated strategy for incremental improvements to safety and congestion problems that is tied to approvals for new or expanded development within the corridors and paid for by those proposing changes. This strategy should be coordinated with the State Traffic Commission;

2. Continue to implement the recommendations for curb cut management on Routes 25 and 6, Church Hill Road and in the Sandy Hook village center;
3. Encourage the Newtown Borough Zoning Commission to adopt and implement curb cut management recommendations for Church Hill Road, between the Flag Pole and I-84 Exit 10;
4. Support Borough efforts to implement measures that will enhance the pedestrian environment, especially along the commercial environments of Queen Street and Church Hill Road;
5. Support implementation efforts that will enhance the pedestrian environment of the Sandy Hook Village Center;
6. Work with HART, HVCEO and ConnDOT to establish fixed-route bus service on a trial basis to determine the viability of public transit as an alternative mode of transportation for Newtown residents and employees of Newtown businesses;
7. Become actively involved in future rail freight planning activities with ConnDOT and the Housatonic Railroad Company to ensure that Newtown's economy is satisfactorily served and that resulting activities are compatible with affected neighborhoods and roads.

ISSUE #3: Appearance of Newtown's Commercial Corridors and Village Areas

1. Most of the commercial uses serving the needs of Newtown's residents have been regulated to front on arterial highways, including Route 25 south of the Borough, Church Hill Road and along Route 6 west of Saw Mill Road. Many commercial uses are located in free-standing buildings with shallow set-backs from the highway and parking lots in front. Other commercial uses are located in small shopping centers with similar design characteristics. The common visual characteristic of many of these commercial uses, often located side by side, is a parking lot fronting the highway, which elicits a character of strip suburban development;
2. Because these commercial uses front on the most heavily traveled roadways in Newtown, their appearance contributes significantly to the daily perception of Newtown's community character, for residents and visitors alike. Currently, some portions of these corridors are not very appealing while others are quite attractive;
3. The character of the Borough and Sandy Hook Village Center are affected by the appearance of commercial uses as well as by the appearance of residential and institutional uses.

Goal: Enhance the Appearance of Newtown's Commercial Corridors and Villages

Strategies:

1. Adopt the recommendation of the Newtown EDC for the Newtown Planning and Zoning Commission to prepare design criteria to be used by developers proposing new and expansion commercial, industrial, multi-family and mixed-use development projects;
2. Develop and implement design criteria for the Sandy Hook Design District and support streetscape enhancement proposals;

3. Develop and implement design criteria for the Hawleyville Design District;
4. Support the Borough's proposal to develop and implement Village District regulations that will govern the design of future development activities within the Borough;
4. Encourage mixed-use development which incorporates landscaped public plazas and design features that create pedestrian friendly environments;
6. **Where mixed-use development is not possible and linkage is not warranted, adequate buffers should be developed between commercial and residential uses.**

ISSUE #4: Shortage of Affordable Housing

1. The Newtown Economic Development Commission has identified the need for affordable, diversified housing opportunities that would include multi-family rental housing.

Goal: Increase the Inventory of Affordable Housing

Strategy:

1. Encourage the development of mixed-use projects within Newtown's principle commercial corridors and districts that include affordable housing. Housing should not be encouraged in areas zoned for industrial/manufacturing uses.

ISSUE #5: Redevelopment of Brownfield Sites

1. Newtown has two brownfield sites. One is the Batchelder property located on Swamp Road in the southern part of Town and the other is the Noranda Metal Industries property located on Prospect Drive, off of South Main Street. The Batchelder property has not paid taxes since 1984. The Noranda property is vacant but continues to pay taxes to the Town. (Source: Newtown Community Development Office)

Goal: Prioritize the Cleanup and Reuse of Newtown's Brownfield Sites

Strategies:

1. Actively market the Batchelder property for redevelopment
2. Work with the owners of the Noranda property to facilitate clean-up and reuse of the facility, without obligating the Town financially.
3. Create incentives that will add to the marketability of the Town's brownfield sites including the fast tracking of local permitting for appropriate reuses and support for grants and other non-municipal funding resources.

ISSUE #6: Development of Agri-business

1. Newtown has a substantial inventory of open land which was once used to support various forms of agricultural uses. Much of this land may eventually be subdivided for residential development.

Goal: Facilitate the maintenance and development of agri-business in scale with Newtown

Strategy:

1. Investigate agri-business needs and develop municipal policies which will facilitate the maintenance and expansion of existing operations and encourage the development of new agri-businesses that are compatible with Newtown's rural character.

ISSUE #7: Sustainable Economic Development

1. A prime tenant of sustainable economic development is the continuous use of land, buildings and infrastructure that has been dedicated to support economic development activities.

The adequacy of a building to support a business use is often tested as the business expands and outgrows available space or the building becomes unsuited to the changing needs of the business activity. As buildings become obsolete relative to the business activities they house they are either updated, expanded or replaced by contemporary structures.

The locational attributes of easy access and supporting infrastructure remain important to the continued viability of the existing business zones in Newtown. The remaining vacant land in these zones will play a role in responding to accommodate expansions of existing business or the creation of new development sites. It is in the Town's interest to remain flexible in its regulations so that the ever-changing building forms required by business can be accommodated, while respecting the environment and affected neighborhoods.

Goal: *Facilitate the sustainability of Newtown's existing economic base.*

Strategies:

1. Review the Town's many business and industrial zones and identify ways that they might be combined. For example, does the need remain for seven separate industrial zones (M-1 thru M-6) in Newtown?
2. Review municipal regulations to determine how they can become more supportive of the economic development reuse of existing buildings;
3. Continue to maintain contact with the business community and initiate actions which are designed to retain and grow existing businesses.

TRANSPORTATION

ISSUE #1: Functional Classification of Roadways

1. There are numerous differences between ConnDOT' and the Town's functional classification of roadways within Newtown.
2. The functional classification of roadways by ConnDOT can affect transportation planning policies and programming and as well as eligibility for ConnDOT and Federal transportation improvement monies.

Goal: *Resolve differences in the Functional Classification of roads within Newtown.*

Strategy:

1. Work with the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials (HVCEO), the areas regional transportation planning entity, to develop the information necessary to make the case to ConnDOT that the past 20 years of rapid development and resulting changes to roadway usage, justify a rethinking of the way in which ConnDOT classifies many of the roads within Newtown.

ISSUE #2: Roadway Congestion and Safety

1. Current areas of traffic congestion and safety issues in Newtown have been described in a series of transportation planning documents;
2. As Newtown and the surrounding areas continue to grow, Newtown's network of State and local roads will experience increases in traffic volumes that are likely to create new points of congestion and additional safety issues;
2. Newtown's network of older local collector roads were not originally laid-out to accommodate today's traffic volumes and vehicle speeds;
3. The Route 25 Expressway will not be constructed in the foreseeable future and should not be counted on to address Route 25 congestion and safety issues;
4. Traffic volume on I-84 will continue to grow, partly in response to overflows from the congested I-95 corridor in lower Fairfield County.

Goal: *Alleviate areas of congestion and address safety issue.*

Strategies- Route 25:

1. Continue to implement the recommendations for curb cut management, as previously adopted the Planning and Zoning Commission;
2. Advocate for intersection oriented safety improvements along the Route 25 corridor, one by one, as can be justified by traffic engineering studies;
3. Work with ConnDOT District IV engineering staff to develop practical solutions to safety problems identified in previous transportation planning studies, which can be implemented by the joint efforts of District IV and Town staff;

An example of this type of cooperative effort would be the improvement of the Botsford Hill Road Intersection with Route 25, to be accomplished by a slight widening of the Town road approach to Route 25 to enable ConnDOT to re-stripe the intersection to create a new turning lane;

4. Enlist HVCEO's support and advocate with ConnDOT for the implementation of the recommendations of the Hawleyville Transportation and Development Study.

Strategies- Route 6:

1. Consider the separate adoption, by the Planning and Zoning Commission, of the curb cut management recommendations included in the Hawleyville Transportation and Development Study;
2. Enlist HVCEO's support and advocate with ConnDOT for the implementation of the recommendations of the Hawleyville Transportation and Development Study;
3. Encourage the Borough Planning and Zoning Commission to consider the adoption of the HVCEO prepared curb cut management for Church Hill Road from the Flagpole to I-84;
4. When completed, consider for incorporation into the POCD, the recommendations of the current ConnDOT transportation study for the high accident area of Church Hill Road, between Commerce Drive and I-84;

Strategies- Route 302:

1. Work with ConnDOT District IV engineering staff to develop practical solutions to the safety problems identified above, which can be implemented by the joint efforts of District IV and Town staff.

Two examples of this type of cooperative effort would be the improvement of the Key Rock Road and Hattertown Road intersections with Route 302, accomplished by slight improvement of Town road approaches and ConnDOT improvement of intersection sight lines.

2. Pursue State Scenic Road status for the portion of Route 302 from Key Rock Road to the east end of Sugar Lane.

Strategies- Route 34:

1. Work with ConnDOT District IV engineering staff to develop practical solutions to the safety problems associated with the Pole Bridge Road intersection. It may be possible that Town personnel could assist in this effort;
2. Work with ConnDOT to determine if any other solutions, such as minor shoulder widening, exist to address traffic backups associated with slow moving trucks on the Route 34 upgrade from Monroe;
3. Town planning and engineering staff should closely follow proposals to improve the Route 34 crossing of the Housatonic River in Monroe, to understand the consequences to Newtown of proposed improvements;
4. Advocate with HVCEO and ConnDOT for the immediate implementation of the "Interim Improvement" of Route 34 access to I-84 at Exit 11;
5. Pursue State Scenic Road status for the portion of Route 34 from the Monroe town line to Pole to Toddy Hill Road to help preserve the character of this area.

Strategy- The Flagpole:

1. Examine the merits of the proposal raised by HVCEO to address safety and traffic flow issues at this intersection through the development of a modern roundabout that would feature the Flagpole as a community monument in the middle of a landscaped circle.

Strategy- Glen Road (SR 816):

1. Pursue State Scenic Road status for Glen Road.
2. When updated ConnDOT right of way maps become available, continue to investigate the possibility of developing a bike path from the Housatonic River to the Sandy Hook village center.

Strategy- Queen Street at Glover Avenue:

1. Analyze traffic volume/accident history, traffic volume projections and previous improvement proposals for this intersection and prepare design alternatives to address safety issues in a manner which recognizes the residential character of the neighborhood.

Strategies- I-84:

1. Continue the POCD endorsement of expanding I-84 to three through travel lanes in each direction;
2. Work with HVCEO and ConnDOT to prepare an “Incident Management Plan” that addresses State and local actions designed to respond to the closure of I-84 due to accidents, maintenance and construction activities that result in an influx of traffic on roads within Newtown.

ISSUE #3: Traffic Calming

1. Several of Newtown’s older collector roads and local streets also function as thru roads for commuters and traffic destined for commercial uses. Examples, among others, include Hanover Road, Currituck Road, Toddy Hill Road and Glover Avenue;
2. The combination of thru traffic and speeds inappropriate for the affected areas can create safety hazards and conditions which diminish the quality of life for affected neighborhoods.

Goal: *The volume and speed of traffic should be compatible with the characteristics of the neighborhood through which the road passes.*

Strategies:

1. Implement traffic calming measures that address safety issues associated with traffic speeds that are not compatible for the character of the area through which the road passes;
2. Consider removing the requirement that a Town road must be “unpaved” to be considered for Town scenic road status.

ISSUE #4: Pedestrian Circulation

1. The desire for improved pedestrian facilities has emerged as a planning issue for the Borough and Sandy Hook village areas;

2. The desire for improved walking and hiking trails is evidenced by the activities and recommendations of the Ad Hoc Open Space Task Force.

Goal: *Improve Opportunities for Pedestrian Activities*

Strategies:

1. As they become available, consider the recommendations of the current Borough/Queen Street Pedestrian Study for incorporation into the POCD;
2. Consider the creation of a pedestrian trail connection between Queen Street and the Fairfield Hills Campus;
3. Consider recent recommendations for the revitalization of the Sandy Hook village area for incorporation into the POCD;
4. Consider the endorsement of the proposed trail from the 5/6 school at Fairfield Hills to the Upper Paugussett State Forest;
5. Pursue the possibility of extending the Monroe rail to trails facility into Newtown;
6. Continue the efforts of the Planning and Zoning Commission to create linked open space throughout the Town to facilitate the creation of a system of inter-connected mixed-use trails;
7. Once the Town's new digital parcel base map has been completed, prepare a composite map of the location of all publicly accessible walking trails.

ISSUE #5: Public Transportation

1. Newtown is not currently served by fixed-route public transportation service for the general public;
2. The results of the Community Planning Survey indicate that there is a desire for public transportation service;
3. The Housatonic Area Regional Transit District (HART), has the capacity to provide fixed-route public transit bus service for the general public in Newtown;
4. The issue of fixed-route public transit service in Newtown has already been studied and found to be technically feasible.

Goal: *Initiate fixed-route bus service in Newtown on a trial basis.*

Strategy:

1. Work with HART, HVCEO and ConnDOT to establish fixed-route bus service on a trial basis to determine the viability of public transit as an alternative mode of transportation for Newtown residents and employees of Newtown businesses.

ISSUE #6: Rail Service

1. Newtown is fortunate to have an active rail line that is capable of providing freight service for area businesses with rail sidings and the utilization of bulk material rail terminals located in Hawleyville;
2. Freight service is an important asset to the economy of Newtown;
3. Rail passenger service is not a current mobility option for Newtown residents;
4. Rail passenger service to Newtown may become viable in the future.

Goal: Maximize Rail Mobility Opportunities**Strategies:**

1. Become actively involved in future rail freight planning activities to ensure that Newtown's economy is satisfactorily served and that resulting activities are compatible with affected neighborhoods and roads;
2. Preserve the capacity along Newtown's existing rail line to implement future rail passenger service.

ISSUE #7: Development Reviews

1. Development proposals presented to the Town for municipal permits often contain elements that affect Newtown's transportation system;
2. Newtown is fortunate to have skilled engineering, public safety and public works personnel to review development proposals that may affect Newtown's transportation system.

Goal: Develop a coordinated review process that will ensure that approved development projects contribute to Newtown's transportation system.**Strategy:**

1. Require each subdivision and site plan application to be reviewed by and signed-off by the Police Chief, the Town Engineer and the Public Works Director, as relates to transportation issues.